

# IT'S A WAGE SHORTAGE, NOT A WORKER SHORTAGE



Why Michigan Restaurant Workers  
Are Leaving the Industry, and  
What Would Make Them Stay

**MAY 2021**

One Fair Wage

UC Berkeley Food Labor Research Center

# OVERVIEW

The COVID-19 outbreak has had devastating impacts on the restaurant industry, with 6 million workers across the country and over 50,000 workers in Michigan losing work temporarily or permanently.<sup>1,2</sup>

Tipped restaurant workers, who are over two-thirds women, reported facing dramatically decreased tips and increased health risks and harassment in restaurants during the pandemic. This report documents the massive exodus of workers from restaurants, their reasons for leaving, and what would make them stay.

The pandemic has had devastating impacts for women and mothers in particular, with many economists dubbing the crisis a “she-cession.”<sup>3</sup> Even prior to the pandemic, working mothers already bore the brunt of domestic duties and were heavily concentrated in low wage jobs.<sup>4,5</sup> As one of the largest employers of women and one of the largest employers of subminimum wage workers, the restaurant industry plays an outsized role in perpetuating inequality among women, particularly women of color.<sup>6,7</sup> Not only must these women endure one of the lowest wages in the country, but also experience higher levels of sexual harassment than any other industry in the country.<sup>8,9</sup> This report documents worker’s experiences of the pandemic, and also how it has motivated many of them to leave the restaurant industry altogether.

## KEY FINDINGS

- **Michigan workers were significantly more likely than the national sample to report that they are considering leaving their restaurant job with the pandemic (64% v 53%).** Nearly three-quarters (72%) of Michigan workers report that they are leaving restaurant jobs due to low wages and tips. ‘Low wages and tips’ was the most popular reason for leaving the industry, nearly 7 percentage points higher than the second most popular reason – COVID health risks.

“It’s not that we’re being lazy – we just want to be paid for the services we actually have. I stand with One Fair Wage because that’s all we want. Ultimately, that’s really what it comes down to. We’re not going to go back to work until we get One Fair Wage, or we’re gonna find other work to do.”

–PARIS SINGELTARY

Host & Server  
Detroit, MI

“Every restaurant I know is struggling with hiring right now. I see places closing or operating at a limited capacity due to not having enough staff. After all the relief efforts, pivoting, and resilience, this is what it is coming down to. Unlike what some would like to have you believe, people who work in the restaurant industry are skilled professionals, and we ought to start treating them like they are. It is time to raise wages.”

–JI HYE KIM

Owner, Miss Kim’s  
Ann Arbor, MI

- **It's a wage shortage, not a worker shortage.** The vast majority of all Michigan respondents (77%) report having a full, stable, livable wage would make them consider staying at their job. Again, 'full, stable, livable wages' was by far the most popular factor that workers reported would make them stay at their job, nearly 30 percentage points higher than the second most popular factor – better COVID safety measures.
- **Workers in Michigan are leaving the industry because tips are down 50% or more at far higher rates than the national sample (74% v 69%). Women are more than twice as likely to report suffering from increased harassment during the pandemic.**
  - ◆ Nearly 9 in 10 Michigan workers (89%) say their tips have decreased during the pandemic, and nearly three quarters (76%) say their tips are down 50% or more.
  - ◆ Michigan workers report leaving their restaurant jobs due to hostility and harassment from customers at a rate 24% higher than the national average.
  - ◆ Michigan workers were far more likely than the national sample to report coming into contact with maskless individuals at least once per shift (82% v 53%), knowing someone that has died from COVID (62% v 50%) and unsurprisingly were significantly more likely to report they were leaving due COVID safety concerns (67% v 55%).
  - ◆ Women in Michigan were most than twice as likely as men to report a noticeable increase in the levels of sexual harassment during the pandemic (51% v 24%).

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THIS REPORT is based on a Michigan pool of over 300 surveys of food service workers conducted online and over the telephone from October 20, 2020 to May 1, 2021. We emailed the surveys to the over 260,000 applicants to the One Fair Wage Emergency Fund starting in October 2020, and collected responses until May 1, 2021, by which time hundreds in Michigan had already responded. Of those who responded, 301 respondents in Michigan reported that they were currently employed, and were thus able to answer most of the survey questions about restaurant employment during the pandemic.

According to recent estimates, over half of restaurant workers and 77% of tipped workers in Michigan are women.<sup>10</sup> Reflecting the fact that Michigan restaurant workers are more likely to be women than restaurant workers nationally, the vast majority (85%) of the Michigan survey respondents were women and over a third (37%) were people of color. Over two-thirds (64%) of the respondents and 66% of all women report that they had children. Women are thus bearing the brunt of the low wages and tips, health risks, and COVID concerns outlined by workers in this report.

## SURVEY DEMO BOX

**301  
MICHIGAN  
SURVEY  
RESPONDENTS**

85% WOMEN  
64% HAVE CHILDREN  
37% PEOPLE OF COLOR  
28% BLACK  
4% LATINX  
20% LGBTQIA+



**TABLE 1**  
Summary of Restaurant  
Worker Retention Survey

### DESIRE TO LEAVE CURRENT JOB

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Report they are considering leaving their job since COVID-19 outbreak	53%	64%

### WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING THEIR JOBS

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Due to low wages and tips	76%	72%
Due to concerns about COVID-19 safety	55%	67%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from customers	39%	51%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from coworkers and/or management	26%	16%
Moving to a different city, state, or country	5%	5%
Moving into a new position within the restaurant industry	4%	2%
Transitioning to a different industry	31%	30%

### WHAT WOULD MAKE WORKERS STAY AT THEIR JOB

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Full, stable, livable wage	78%	77%
Increased hours	36%	30%
Paid sick leave	49%	40%
Better COVID-19 safety protocols and enforcement	41%	51%
Health benefits or insurance	44%	49%
An improved working environment with less hostility from customers, coworkers, and/or management	45%	44%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 4/21-5/21

**TABLE 2**

Summary of COVID-19 Health and Customer Harassment Impacts on Restaurant Workers

### RESTAURANT EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO COVID-19

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Has personally contracted COVID-19	21%	19%
Knows someone who has contracted COVID-19	95%	94%
Of those who know someone infected, percent who knows someone who has died from COVID-19 or COVID-19 Complications	50%	62%
Employees who report that one or more employees at their restaurant has contracted COVID-19	74%	71%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person at least once during their shift	53%	82%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person 30 or more times during their shift	38%	23%

### CUSTOMER HOSTILITY, HARASSMENT, AND IMPACT ON TIPPING

Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19	87%	88%
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19 by at least 50% or more	69%	74%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	80%	85%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior on a weekly basis from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	49%	51%
Felt reluctant to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols upon customers out of concern that customer would tip less	60%	63%
Has experienced or witnessed a noticeable change in overall levels of unwanted sexualized comments from customers	47%	49%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-5/21

# WHY RESTAURANT WORKERS ARE LEAVING THE INDUSTRY & WHAT WOULD MAKE THEM STAY

**TABLE 3**  
Summary of Restaurant Worker Retention Survey

## DESIRE TO LEAVE CURRENT JOB

Report they are considering leaving their job since COVID-19 outbreak

53% NATIONAL

64% MICHIGAN

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 5/21-4/21



## PRE-PANDEMIC TURNOVER IN THE RESTAURANT INDUSTRY

The restaurant industry has always had one of the highest turnover rates in the country and it only increased in recent years.<sup>11</sup> In 2019, the turnover rate for the accommodations and food services industry was 78.6%.<sup>12</sup> Multiple studies have found that one of the main reasons restaurant workers decide to leave their job is to pursue a position that pays a higher wage.<sup>13,14</sup> When restaurant workers are taken care of, they stay longer, are more productive, and provide better quality service.<sup>15</sup> However, despite all the evidence that a livable wage would reduce turnover and increase productivity for restaurants, the National Restaurant Association (“the Other NRA”) and its local affiliates, one of most powerful trade lobbies in country, continues to lobby against measures to increase the minimum wage and eliminate the subminimum wage for tipped workers.<sup>16</sup>

## MASS EXODUS DUE TO LOW WAGES AND DECREASED TIPS

The restaurant industry’s pre-existing economic instability, sexual harassment, racial inequities, and consequent high turnover rates in the restaurant industry were all worsened during the pandemic. As described below in Section IV, with COVID-19, the restaurant industry’s low wages were compounded with dramatically reduced tips and increased hostility, harassment and health risks, resulting in nearly two-thirds (64%) of all Michigan restaurant workers surveyed reporting that they are considering leaving their jobs. When asked to choose all applicable reasons for leaving, nearly 70% also indicated that this was due to COVID concerns, but the most popular reason for leaving the industry by far was low wages and tips. Almost three-quarters (72%) of all workers and 78% of women in Michigan indicated that low wages and tips are causing them to leave restaurant jobs.

**TABLE 4**  
Summary of  
Restaurant Worker  
Retention Survey

**WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING THEIR JOBS**

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Due to low wages and tips	76%	72%
Due to concerns about COVID-19 safety	55%	67%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from customers	39%	51%
Due to concerns of hostility and harassment from coworkers and/or management	26%	26%
Moving to a different city, state, or country	5%	5%
Moving into a new position within the restaurant industry	4%	2%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 4/21-5/21

“As we return back to full capacity and loosened restrictions, finding help has been difficult across the industry. We have been able to avoid that by paying improved wages and creating a workspace that people are comfortable at. It’s pretty simple, this is hard work that people pour themselves into and they deserve better.”

–KEVIN DEGROOD  
Managing Officer, North Center Brewing Co.  
Northville, MI

**WHAT WOULD MAKE RESTAURANT WORKERS STAY**

When asked to choose all applicable factors that would make them stay in restaurants, earning a full, stable, livable wage was by far the most popular factor that Michigan restaurant workers indicated would make them stay at their job – again, not surprising, given the dramatic decline in tips. Over three-quarters of all Michigan workers, including women chose a full, stable, livable wage as a reason to stay, significantly higher than any other factor. If restaurants hope to retain a significant portion of the workforce, the nation must enact a livable wage policy that allows workers to remain in restaurants.

**TABLE 5**  
Summary of  
Restaurant Worker  
Retention Survey

**WHAT WOULD MAKE WORKERS STAY AT THEIR JOB**

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Full, stable, livable wage	78%	77%
Increased hours	36%	30%
Paid sick leave	49%	40%
Better COVID-19 safety protocols and enforcement	41%	51%
Health benefits or insurance	44%	49%
An improved working environment with less hostility from customers, coworkers, and/or management	45%	44%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 4/21-5/21

# WHY WORKERS ARE LEAVING: COVID-19 IMPACTS ON TIPPED RESTAURANT WORKERS

During the pandemic, nearly 50,000 restaurant workers in Michigan lost their jobs; much more than in previous recessions, these employment losses have fallen mostly on women.<sup>17,18</sup> Restaurants and other public-facing businesses that were shut down for COVID-19 safety have high concentrations of women. In addition, the closure of schools and daycare facilities, and the implementation of remote learning, have increased childcare needs for women, who continue to bear the brunt of childrearing even when they are the primary breadwinners in the household.<sup>19</sup> This challenge is particularly hard on women in the restaurant industry, who are concentrated in the majority in tipped occupations earning a subminimum wage.



Despite current industry arguments that workers are not returning to work because they are choosing to stay home and collect unemployment insurance, most tipped workers reported that they either could not access these benefits or earned much less than they should have. This also led to complications with their tips not being recognized as income. By late spring of 2020, a majority of tipped workers experienced difficulty accessing unemployment insurance due to their low wages.<sup>20</sup> Women tipped workers experienced even greater challenges when applying for unemployment insurance due to their subminimum wage than their male counterparts, and also higher rates of home and food insecurity. Over 60% of women in Michigan reported they were either unsure or did not qualify for unemployment benefits, compared to 59% of their male counterparts.<sup>21</sup>



**TABLE 6**  
Impact of COVID-19  
on Tipped Service  
Workers

	NATIONAL APPLICANTS	MICHIGAN APPLICANTS	MI WOMEN APPLICANTS	MI MEN APPLICANTS
Do not qualify or are unsure if they qualify for unemployment insurance	61%	61%	62%	59%
Unable or are unsure whether they can pay their rent or mortgage	92%	91%	91%	92%
Can only afford groceries for 2 weeks or less	79%	82%	82%	84%

Source: One Fair Wage Tipped Worker Survey Data collected 10/20-2/21

## LESS TIPS, MORE HOSTILITY AND HARASSMENT

After facing severe challenges in accessing unemployment insurance at relatively higher rates than other workers, many workers felt compelled to return to work in restaurants before they felt safe doing so.<sup>22</sup> When they returned, they were asked to do more for less. In Michigan, most workers (88%) reported that their tips have decreased since the pandemic and over 70% of workers report their tips have decreased by half or more.

Women in Michigan faced far greater declines in tips and were more likely to report regularly receiving a lower tip from customers due to COVID-19 safety enforcement than all other workers. The vast majority of women in Michigan (89%) reported that their tips declined since COVID-19 and over 70% report that their tips decreased by 50% or more. Because many women in the restaurant industry already have some of the lowest wages in the country and lacked access to not only unemployment insurance, but also supportive work-family policies, the pandemic had amplified the pre-existing inequality in the industry.

**TABLE 7**  
Summary of  
COVID-19 Health  
and Customer  
Harassment  
Impacts on  
Restaurant  
Workers

### CUSTOMER HOSTILITY, HARASSMENT, AND IMPACT ON TIPPING

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19	87%	88%
Report that tips have decreased since COVID-19 by at least 50% or more	69%	74%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	80%	85%
Experienced or witnessed hostile behavior on a weekly basis from customers in response to staff enforcing COVID-19 safety protocols	49%	51%
Felt reluctant to enforce COVID-19 safety protocols upon customers out of concern that customer would tip less	60%	63%
Has experienced or witnessed a noticeable change in overall levels of unwanted sexualized comments from customers	47%	49%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-5/21

Restaurant workers have become the de facto public health marshals, enforcing critical masks and social distancing protocols in one of the pandemic's most dangerous environments, according to the Centers for Disease Control.<sup>23</sup> A major source of restaurant workers' inability to protect themselves and enforce critical health and safety protocols with customers, and in 43 states, is the subminimum wage for tipped workers, because it requires workers to derive a substantial portion of their income from customer tips. During the pandemic, these workers' reliance on tips from customers has made it nearly impossible to enforce critical social distancing and mask rules on these same customers.



The majority of the workers surveyed in Michigan (85%) reported that they have experienced customers becoming hostile to staff for following public health guidelines, such as insisting upon wearing a mask. Women were more likely than men to witness or experience such hostile behavior from customers on a weekly basis in response to enforcing these public health protocols. Unsurprisingly, over 60% of all Michigan workers report feeling reluctant to enforce COVID-19 protocols out of concern that customers would reciprocate with aggression, hostility, and lesser tips. This feeling is based on real experience; nearly 80% of Michigan workers (77%) report having received a lesser tip than normal after enforcing COVID-19 protocols on customers. Of those workers, 49% report that receiving a lesser tip for enforcing these protocols is a weekly experience. Simultaneously, restaurant workers are presented with the impossible task, and losing battle, of policing the customers who directly subsidize their wages. The outcomes are even more significant for workers of color, with Black tipped workers reporting far greater decline in tips and more punishment for trying to enforce social distancing and mask rules in the form of lesser tips than their white counterparts.<sup>24</sup> The subminimum wage for tipped workers thus created an impossible situation in which workers were forced to enforce public health rules on the same customers from whom they had to get tips to survive.

With the pandemic, fewer customers and lessened tips has increased the power dynamic between male customers and women servers, forcing many women, particularly those with children, to tolerate even higher levels of sexual harassment than before. Michigan women service workers were twice as likely as their male counterparts to report that sexual harassment increased during the pandemic (51% v. 24%). Hundreds of women have reported that they are repeatedly asked to remove their masks so male customers can judge their looks and their tips on that basis.<sup>25</sup>



## INCREASED HEALTH RISKS

It should come as no surprise, given the high-risk environment and workers’ inability to enforce social distancing and mask rules given their dependence on customer tips, that restaurant workers report extremely high levels of exposure to COVID-19 and infection and death of co-workers due to this exposure. Nearly one in five workers in Michigan reported having contracted COVID-19 themselves (19%) and 94% knew someone who had contracted the virus; nearly three-quarters (74%) reported that someone in their restaurant contracted the virus. The majority of workers in Michigan (82%) report that they are in contact with maskless individuals at least once during their restaurant shifts.

These alarming statistics were worse for women – not surprising given the data above indicating that women were more often punished in the form of lower tips for enforcing COVID-19 safety measures to protect their health and others. Women surveyed in Michigan were twice as likely to report that they had personally contracted the virus and were more likely to report that one or more employees had contracted the virus at their restaurant than men.

**TABLE 8**  
Summary of  
COVID-19 Health  
and Customer  
Harassment  
Impacts on  
Restaurant Workers

### RESTAURANT EMPLOYEE EXPOSURE TO COVID-19

	NATIONAL	MICHIGAN
Has personally contracted COVID-19	21%	19%
Knows someone who has contracted COVID-19	95%	94%
Of those who know someone infected, percent who knows someone who has died from COVID-19 or COVID-19 Complications	50%	62%
Employees who report that one or more employees at their restaurant has contracted COVID-19	74%	74%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person at least once during their shift	53%	82%
Employees are within 6 feet of an unmasked person 30 or more times during their shift	38%	23%

Source: One Fair Wage Worker Public Health Survey Data collected 10/20-5/21

## CONCLUSION: ALL WORKERS NEED ONE FAIR WAGE NOW

At the end of our survey, two thirds (66%) of respondents in Michigan answered ‘yes’ to signing on to the following statement:

***“I do not want to return to work in a restaurant until we have One Fair Wage – a full minimum wage with tips on top – and the necessary safety protocols to keep us safe! If I do return to work before One Fair Wage becomes law, I cannot guarantee that I will enforce social distancing and mask rules with customers because I need to be able to get tips from those same customers. I call on my congressional representatives to take action!”***



Restaurants received significant relief in the COVID-19 package passed by Congress in March 2021. However, in order to reopen and recover, restaurants will need to be able to find enough willing employees to reopen at full capacity. With more than half of all workers reporting that they are considering leaving their restaurant jobs and more than three quarters indicating that the primary reason is low wages and decreased tips, it is clear that we must raise workers’ wages nationwide in order for consumers to enjoy the vibrant restaurant industry they experienced pre-pandemic.

The mass exodus of workers from the restaurant industry is clearly greatest among women, who are the extreme example of what a ‘she-recession’ means. Since the pandemic, women – disproportionately women of color – have suffered the most in job losses economy-wide and have borne the added responsibilities of child care while many schools remain closed.<sup>26</sup> A recent poll by Marketplace found that 63% of women are the primary person in their household responsible for supervising their children’s remote school during the pandemic compared to only 29% of men.<sup>27</sup> Women who work in the restaurant industry in particular already typically lack accessible and affordable childcare options to take on more desirable shifts, have among the lowest wages in the country, and with the recent outbreak have had the compounded role of enforcing safety

protocols needed to protect the public while facing economic retaliation and sexual harassment from the very people they are trying to protect.<sup>28</sup> This report's findings highlight that this vulnerability is not new and that it is exacerbated in every way by their dependence on tips to make up a majority of their wage.

Forced to find ways to entice workers to stay in the industry and buoyed by the recent federal momentum to raise the minimum wage, many independent restaurant employers are proactively raising their wages. However, they cannot raise wages alone; employers need the

level playing field that federal policy change would create. The Raise the Wage Act, which would finally eliminate slavery's legacy of the subminimum wage for tipped workers and increase the minimum wage to \$15 for all workers, is now a COVID emergency, not only for service workers themselves but also for the long-term economic stability of their families, the communities that rely on them, and restaurant industry itself.

As the research shows, women in the restaurant industry are especially in need of a livable wage to better cover their childcare expenses and provide for their families. These women have borne the brunt of the crisis, and those who are tipped workers have experienced a significant decline in their tips while taking on the compounded role of public health enforcement. If the nation wants to ensure both economic recovery and public health, these workers must be paid the full

minimum wage with tips on top, enabling them to enforce safety protocols and reject dangerous and demeaning sexual harassment from customers. One Fair Wage – an equal and just wage with tips on top – must be enacted as permanent law now.



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